

## **CARE FOR YOUR STUDENTS? FIGURE OUT THEIR STRESS (CORRELATING ANXIETY AND COMMUNICATION – A PEEP INTO THE EMOTIONS OF ESL LEARNERS)**

**REVATHY RAVICHANDRAN<sup>1</sup> & DOLLY JOHN VARGHESE<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>KCG College of Technology, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

<sup>2</sup>Hindustan University, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

### **ABSTRACT**

Oral communication apprehension, suffered by many students, is an anxiety accompanied by a feeling of uneasiness and results in a feeling of helplessness in a person. Several factors contribute to this anxiety. These variables include: motivation, self-confidence, low self esteem etc. Recent studies have shown that students' anxiety affect their emotional intelligence and research on direct link between emotional intelligence and academic performance have shown that "students with higher levels of emotional intelligence had more self efficacy (self confidence and knowledge that one can handle any problem or selectively) and high self efficacy in turn enhanced their academic performance." (Vinod K. Shanwal, Gurpreet Bajaj & S B Singh, 2008). However, students can be made to overcome this anxiety and improve their emotional quotient. EI training is expected to promote positive thoughts and actions and make him a confident communicator, as a person needs to communicate appropriately for his emotions to be understood. My paper is an attempt to show how it becomes the duty of a language facilitator to help students overcome their fear. The facilitator needs to understand that what the learner needs is understanding and not a judgment

**KEYWORDS:** Communication Apprehension, Anxiety, Emotional Intelligence, Motivation, Self-Esteem, Learner Needs

### **INTRODUCTION**

*"Come to the edge."*

*"We can't. We're afraid."*

*"Come to the edge."*

*"We can't. We will fall."*

*"Come to the edge."*

*And they came.*

*And he pushed them*

*And they flew.*

--- Guillaume Apollinaire, French Poet and Philosopher

In the past a language occupied an important status because of a country's military and political supremacy. In the

present scenario, it is the important people in the technical field, and the magnets in the corridors of money and power, who decide the global language. To quote David Crystal:

The need for a global language is particularly appreciated by the international academic and business communities, and it is here that the adoption of a single lingua franca is most in evidence, both in lecture-rooms and board-rooms, as well as in thousands of individual contacts being made daily all over the globe. A conversation over the Internet between academic physicists in Sweden, Italy, and India is at present practicable only if a common language is available. A situation where a Japanese company director arranges to meet German and Saudi Arabian contacts in a Singapore hotel to plan a multi-national deal would not be impossible, if each plugged into a 3-way translation support system, but it would be far more complicated than the alternative, which is for each to make use of the same language. As these examples suggest, the growth in international contacts has been largely the result of two separate developments. The physicists would not be talking so conveniently to each other at all without the technology of modern communication. And the business contacts would be unable to meet so easily in Singapore without the technology of air transportation. The availability of both these facilities in the twentieth century, more than anything else, provided the circumstances needed for a global language to grow. (Crystal, 1997)

This has resulted in English being accepted as the global language.

Being well aware of this, every Indian student wants to acquire good oral communication skills; yet due to communicative apprehension he finds it difficult to speak fluently. Even a good student fumbles when asked to speak in public or before unknown persons due to low emotional intelligence – low self-esteem, lack of confidence and unable to channelize and manage his emotions towards effective communication. As Daniel Goleman puts it:

EI is crucial for all life success, including (for) students in the classroom, because of the basic design of the brain. Our emotions evolved as a tool for survival, and today emotions have a privileged position in the brain. When we are upset the emotional centers can hijack the thinking centers, rendering us unable to think clearly, focus on the task at hand, perceive in an undistorted manner, and even make it harder to remember what's relevant to what we're doing (instead we remember easily anything about what's upsetting us). So whether in the workplace or the classroom, managing our emotions is the prerequisite to learning and focus.

(<http://danielgoleman.info/on-self-awareness/>)

Many psychological reasons may be attributed to oral communication apprehension or stress – an important reason for low emotional intelligence, which results in poor academic performance by students and so an English teacher in India needs to understand these factors – the learner's emotions, their anxiety or stress - and don the role of a motivator and facilitator to help students become fearless speakers.

## **PSYCHOLINGUISTICS AND VERBAL BEHAVIOUR**

Psycholinguistics, an inter-disciplinary field of psychology and linguistics, has analyzed this problem and provided the language teachers with some of the reasons for this apprehension among students.

Studies of language and its verbal behavior have always been of immense interest to psychologists as language is nothing but an expression of thought whose roots are in the mind of the individual. "Wilhelm Wundt was the first

experimental psychologist and it was the workers of his laboratory who took interest in the ‘word-association experiment’, the origin of which is attributed to Sir. Francis Galton” (Wallace E Lambert). Many others like Hermann Ebbinghaus followed with experiments on the formation of associations and other meditational processes which interested behaviouristic psychologists. By the late nineteen forties linguists once again turned to psychology for answers to some general questions concerning language acquisition, perceptual cognates of linguistic units, the difference between comprehension and production of sounds and the like. (Houston, Susan H. 1972) Committees for interaction between linguistics and psychology were being formed, guided by linguists like Thomas Sebeok and psychologists like Charles Osgood. The result of this interaction has been a gradual coalescing of the two fields into a new discipline called Psycholinguistics. Chomsky had always maintained that there were important connections between these two disciplines- linguistics and psychology. The major trend appeared in the early 1950s and was a convergence of psychology (especially learning theory), descriptive linguistics, and information theory. This convergence was facilitated by the Social Science Research Council and the Carnegie Corporation. “Essentially it amounted to the bringing together of linguists and psychologists, so that each group could become familiarized with the techniques and concepts of the other.” (Osgood and Thomas A Sebeok, 1965)

Lambert E Wallace, an eminent psychologist of language and culture, says that there are factors and problems which seem to be barriers in language learning. But

.....they are not difficult to circumvent; that bilingualism does not imply various types of handicaps, but rather offers assets and enrichments of all sorts; that a person can comfortably become a bilingual and bicultural; that one’s attitude toward the other group whose language is being learnt plays an important role in language acquisition and that such attitudes both affect and are affected by one’s motivation to learn the other language. Bilingualism is a critical area of psycholinguistics and sociolinguistic inquiry.” (Lambert E Wallace)

He further adds that “language teachers and language trainers could profit considerably from a careful study of psychology of personality and the problem of attitude change.”(Lambert E Wallace)

## **LANGUAGE APTITUDES AND THE THEORY OF HUMAN ABILITIES**

Language aptitudes and the theory of human abilities are analyzed by many psychologists. Most noted among them Carroll, has given a summary of the most important variables in second language learning:

- Phonetic coding ability,
- The ability to handle grammar (the forms of language and their arrangements in natural utterances),
- Rote memorization ability for foreign language materials, and
- The ability to infer linguistic forms, rules and patterns from new linguistic content itself with minimum of supervision or guidance. (J B Carroll, 1958).

It can be noticed that ‘phonetic coding ability’ is listed first, as oral communication is the most difficult of all when it comes to learning a foreign language, more so the English language, as there is no one-to-one correspondence between the letters and sounds. It is no wonder that ESL students find it hard to speak in English and are scared when called to do so.

## ANXIETY

Anxiety may be defined as mental distress with respect to some anticipated frustration. It is usually recognized as an unendurable form of suffering. This occurs in a situation when an individual feels incompetent or helpless in a situation. The most acute form of anxiety arises when the individual feels that his personal adequacy or his existence in the group is threatened. He may fear the loss of his status among his friends or threatened with failure in school etc., due to incompetent performance. It has been noticed that losing one's standing with others, losing one's power and capacity to enjoy, gives rise to most profound anxieties to most individuals throughout life.

This anxiety should not be mistaken for fear, although both have much in common. While "fear is an immediate response to the present danger situation, anxiety is a fearful anticipation of dangerous situations to be encountered in future" (Baruah D K, 2006). Since anxiety points to the future, the feeling is magnified and imaginary. This leads to a negative feeling and is characterized by helplessness. The person who suffers from this anxiety feels that there is nothing he can do and hence tries to look for ways to escape in order to avoid the approaching danger.

## REASONS FOR ANXIETY

- **Birth- is the First Trauma and Cause of Anxiety in Some:** Birth is a separation from the mother and the new born baby feels helpless as it has to depend on his own reflexes to adjust. To the extent that an individual feels adequate in the situation, his anxiety is reduced or even absent. So an infant coming into the world without difficulty and with good health shows less anxiety, where as a premature baby and those whose birth is difficult show more signs of anxiety in later years. Thus anxiety could be a result of birth trauma and become a birth/ personality trait.
- Anxiety can be passed on from parent to child. Anxiety in parents breeds anxiety in children. An anxious mother is bound to have tense, worried, nervous children.
- The anxious child will usually be found to have come from an insecure home. Insecurity here can mean anything from financial insecurity to emotional insecurity.
- Low tolerance and control level can result in anxiety.
- **Influence of Early Infantile Anxiety:** The situations that cause anxiety to the little baby serve as the roots of anxiety all through life. Every person, however normal carries with him the traces of original fear. These are readily observed in dreams and crop up in unaccountable disturbances of behavior such as speech disturbances, motor in-coordination etc.
- Absence of mother or separation from mother serves as a principal danger situation and results in the arousal of anxiety.
- Fear of unknown people too may cause anxiety.
- Over protected children may feel anxious in a new setting and among new people.
- Anxiety may arise from threats of danger.
- Anxiety may arise over attacks on personality and personal inadequacy, or threat to ego status.

- Anxiety may be due to anticipated punishment or pain.
- Anxiety may be due to a previous experience (ex: punished in the past in a similar situation)
- Anxiety may also be due to over threat to self- esteem and social status.

### **PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY**

- Anxiety shows itself by a number of physical symptoms ranging from cardiac disturbances such as palpitation of the heart, rapid heartbeat and a feeble pulse to rapid breathing and alimentary disturbances resulting in vomiting etc.
- There could be motor disturbances such as: shaking, trembling, and shuddering to clearing of the throat or wrinkling of the forehead.
- Increase in sensory sensibility may also happen due to anxiety. Irritability to noise or sensitivity to bright lights may be an indication of anxiety.
- Glandular disturbances due to anxiety can result in profuse sweating or clammy hands.
- Headache, migraine, insomnia, extreme fatigue, dizziness and violent behavior are also symptoms of anxiety or disturbance of the mind.

### **EFFECTS OF ANXIETY**

This feeling of uneasiness results in:

- Feeling of helplessness.
- Loss of confidence.
- Fosters inferiority complex
- Makes him/her a pessimist, always anticipating the worst
- Lack of concentration
- Poor memory - confusion and doubt in thought and speech

### **ORAL COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION**

Communication apprehension (CA), according to McCroskey, is an "individual level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons". According to Friedman (1980), communication apprehension is noticed in an individual "when the ability and desire to participate in discussion are present, but the process of verbalizing is inhibited; shyness or reticence is occurring". It is an anxiety which can profoundly affect much or all of a student's oral communication, social skills, and self-esteem. While in some, this can be noticed only when the person has to speak in public, some others experience this anxiety even when talking to each other or among friends.

This communication apprehension or anxiety may be one of the reasons why some students are unusually quiet and do not interact or make friends with anybody in the classroom. This is also the reason why some students, although

they know the answer or can express their thoughts fail to do so. This fear to communicate affects not only their ability to speak fearlessly but in some cases, also their performance.

## **EMOTIONS AND COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION**

Several factors contribute to this communication apprehension. Krashen's "Affective Filter Hypothesis" views that a number of 'affective variables' play a crucial role in second language learning. These variables include: motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. Krashen claims that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. Low motivation, low self-esteem, and debilitating anxiety can combine to 'raise' the affective filter and form a 'mental block' that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition. In other words, when the filter is 'up' it impedes language acquisition.

Communication apprehension, suffered by many students, is an anxiety accompanied by a feeling of uneasiness and results in a feeling of helplessness in a person. This helplessness makes the student a pessimist, always anticipating the worst. As a result the student loses confidence and suffers from an inferiority complex. Many a time, lack of concentration, poor memory, confusion and doubt in thought and speech that is noticed by a teacher in his / her students are all due to this anxiety. As a result the student commits errors, blunders and mistakes - all of which testify an underlying nervousness and presence of anxiety. In course of time this leads to communication apprehension and low self esteem; which in turn affects the learner's speaking skills

Another widely accepted explanation for CA is the Negative Cognitive Appraisal Model (Glaser, 1981). The model assumes that the quiet child was criticized for his or her early language performance. As a result, the child learned to expect negative reactions and subsequently learned to avoid them by keeping quiet. Even if teachers, parents, or other children merely appear to be reacting negatively to such a child's talk, the child will perform poorly and avoid oral communication situations (Bond, 1984).

According to Mc Croskey seven factors could result in a quiet child. They are: low intellectual skills, speech skill deficiencies, voluntary social introversion, social alienation, communication anxiety, low social self-esteem and ethnic/cultural divergence in communication norms. (Mc Croskey, 1980)

Krashen, Stephen D, the eminent American Linguist says "Often the CA students' lack of response or participation has a negative, spiraling affect--they are perceived as less capable, and are thus called on less frequently in class discussion. Their lack of enthusiasm tends to limit teachers' attention to them, which further reinforces their own self-evaluation."

To escape speaking, the learners adopt various defense measures: topic avoidance, message abandonment, using word equals from mother tongue or first language, repetitions, fillers, code switching and circumlocution (wandering around and off the subject), using far-fetched examples or analogies and above all silence – resulting in lack of participation.

## **HELPING STUDENTS OVERCOME ANXIETY & COACHING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE**

Recent studies have shown that students' anxiety affect their emotional intelligence and research on direct link between emotional intelligence and academic performance have shown that "students with higher levels of emotional intelligence had more self efficacy (self confidence and knowledge that one can handle any problem or selectively) and

high self efficacy in turn enhanced their academic performance.” (Vinod K. Shanwal, Gurpreet Bajaj & S B Singh, 2008)

However, students can be made to overcome this anxiety and improve their emotional quotient and help develop high emotional intelligence. EQ (Emotional Quotient/ Emotional Intelligence) was first coined by Peter Salovey and John Mayer in 1990 as, "the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth." Thus EI is expected to promote positive thoughts and actions.

Daniel Goleman, the man who redefined intelligence and success with his book, *Emotional Intelligence- Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, defines “EI as the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating and managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships.”(Goleman, 1995) He further lists the four components of EI as: Self Awareness, Self Regulation, Management Skills / Social skills and Competence and Relationship Management. Emotional self awareness is nothing but reading and recognizing one’s emotions, accurate self assessment, knowing one’s strengths and limitations and building self confidence and self worth and self management is managing ones emotions, keeping disruptive emotions under control, being optimistic and exploiting opportunities. Cultivating social skills helps one to empathize and maintain a healthy relationship with all and relationship management helps to manage conflicts and build bonds. At the center of all these are positive thinking and confident communication.

The best part is that EI is trainable and in this case understanding the emotions of the students and encouraging them and training them will help students to perform better in their academics as well as their work place later.

Imagine having the support of someone who champions your success as much as you do, someone who will ask great questions to encourage you to tap your own well of resources, to find the solutions you didn’t know you had; someone who will challenge you to expand your horizons and see things from different perspectives and viewpoints. This is what EI coaching is all about. (Neale, Spencer- Arnell & Wilson, 2009)

## **ROLE OF LANGUAGE TEACHER**

Most people who are communication apprehensive are neither skill deficient nor different from others in the general culture. Typically, they are normal people who are simply afraid to communicate. Most of the social problems that are experienced by these individuals stem from how they are perceived by others and how others respond to them. With this in mind, the teacher needs to don the role of a counsellor and interact with the student. These sessions will be a test to the teacher’s patience as a quiet child will not respond that easily. However, with regular interaction, the learner will open up.

The teacher needs to understand that he/she may not get the expected response from the learner not because of the learner’s lack of interest but because of communication apprehension. The teacher should make time to study the student’s problem and work to fix it, rather than scold or humiliate the learner, as this act will only result in increasing the learner’s communication apprehension. The teacher’s role in this situation should be one of a doctor than of a judge. He/she needs to understand that what the learner needs is understanding and not a judgment.

Class room environment too plays a significant role in reducing communication apprehension and so the teacher should provide the extrinsic motivation required for positive learning to take place within the four walls of the classroom. A friendly class room environment created by a loving and understanding teacher will help even the diffident students feel

comfortable in the classroom. Once the students feel comfortable, they will begin to talk fearlessly and learning will take place.

## CONCLUSIONS

A friendly class room environment created by a loving and understanding teacher will help even the diffident students feel comfortable in the classroom. Once the students feel comfortable, they will begin to talk fearlessly and learning will take place.

*The teacher should show the learners the way to fly;*

*not clip their wings and maim them. -Self*

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